

This Time It's Real

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary
(Language)



SYNOPSIS

When seventeen-year-old Eliza Lin's essay about meeting the love of her life unexpectedly goes viral, her entire life changes overnight. Now she has the approval of her classmates at her new international school in Beijing, a career-launching internship opportunity at her favourite magazine . . . and a massive secret to keep.

Eliza made her essay up. She's never been in a relationship before, let alone in love. All good writing is lying, right?

Desperate to hide the truth, Eliza strikes a deal with the famous actor in her class, the charming but aloof Caz Song. She'll help him write his college applications if he poses as her boyfriend. Caz is a dream boyfriend—he passes handwritten notes to her in class, makes her little sister laugh, and takes her out on motorcycle rides to the best snack stalls around the city.

But when her relationship with Caz starts feeling a little too convincing, all of Eliza's carefully laid plans are threatened. Can she still follow her dreams if it means breaking her own heart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Liang is a recent graduate of the University of Melbourne. Born in Beijing, she grew up travelling back and forth between China and Australia, but somehow ended up with an American accent.

When she isn't stressing out over her college assignments or writing, she can be found making over-ambitious to-do lists, binge-watching dramas and having profound conversations with her pet labradoodle about who's a good dog.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the book answer the answer and discuss the following questions:
 - Have a look at the cover and the blurb. See if you can identify any elements of the romance genre. For instance, the cover's colour scheme, the positioning of the two main characters and the fake-dating trope mentioned in the blurb.
 - By dissecting the blurb, pinpoint what you think the story will be about and the concepts that it might explore. What seems interesting to you about the story before reading it?
- Throughout the story, Eliza struggles with figuring out where exactly is 'home', and what it means for her. On p 241, Eliza recounts a time where she had to write an essay on the topic of home. Her teacher, not understanding

Eliza's upbringing, says her story about fragmentation is wrong and not the correct definition of 'home'. Eliza further reflects: 'Thinking of all those rooms I walked through at eight, ten, fourteen years old and all the people I met in them . . . if maybe I left a piece of myself in them and took a piece of them with me too; isn't that what homes are made of? A collection of the things that shape you?' (p 242). Do you agree or disagree with Eliza's statement? Do you think home must be a physical place, or do you think we build a sense of home amongst the people in our lives, experiences we've had and things that we've learned along the way?

- Identify something or someone from your life that you believe has shaped who you are today. Why did they/it have an influence on you?
- At what point does Eliza realise that Beijing could be her home? What happens on p 167 that makes her realise her growing attachment and sense of belonging to Beijing?
- Picture yourself in Eliza's position. You've just left your home and friends behind in another country, having to start afresh. How would you feel leaving behind everything and everyone you knew? Write a short letter addressed to a close friend of yours discussing what you will miss about them and your hometown.
- What is 'culture shock'? Write down the definition. After you've done this, read the opening chapter. Even though Eliza was born in China, coming back to Beijing years later doesn't feel the same. What aspects of culture shock does Eliza experience here? What aspects of her old home feel different and unfamiliar to Eliza?
 - Have you ever experienced culture shock when you've travelled or moved places yourself? How did you go about settling into the different norms of a new place?
- Can you identify some of the places Eliza has lived?
- How do you think Eliza comes to reconcile the beauty of her cultural hybridity by the end of the story? Do you think she's more accepting of herself? What/who helps her feel more comfortable in her own skin?
- Eliza's relationship with her best friend Zoe from her previous school suffers once Eliza moves. Identify instances in the story where we start to see this. One example might be when Eliza notices her joint Spotify playlist with Zoe has had its name changed to 'recs for divya' (Zoe's new friend) (p 187). How does Eliza respond when she starts to sense Zoe and her growing apart? What would you do in a similar situation?
- Think about your friendships. What do you think about them makes them special to you? Is it the gifts or the fun activities you do together? Or is it the smaller (however by no means less significant) things Eliza mentions, like late night texts, frayed string bracelets and compilations of your favourite songs? Or perhaps it's both? Write your thoughts down and share them with your friend!
- How does Eliza open up and repair the distance between herself and Zoe? Does their friendship return to what it once was, or is it different? Do you think it's a good thing for friendships and relationships to naturally evolve and change as life happens? Is it sustainable to expect a friendship to always stay the same?
- Towards the end of the story, Eliza becomes more open and willing to be vulnerable with the people in her life, even if that may mean eventual heartbreaks. Pinpoint moments in the story of Eliza's growth.
- How does Caz make Eliza feel comfortable to open up? (For instance, when he helps her find the bracelet that Zoe gave her.) How does he teach her to trust again? Why is being vulnerable a good thing?
- Do you think Eliza is in the wrong for making up her essay? Is it ethical? Write a couple of paragraphs explaining your answer. Make sure to have a different point in each paragraph, discussing the moral implications. Have a go at discussing your points of argument with someone with a different answer to yours. You may even want to have a friendly debate!
- Eliza's plan to keep the lie going is to engage in another life and fake-date actor Caz Song. How is this a publicity stunt? There are various moments in story where people poke holes in Eliza's relationship with Caz. How could it impact Eliza, Caz, their careers and the people around them if they had been exposed by the media?
- From the beginning, Zoe is apprehensive of Eliza publishing an essay that isn't real, while Eliza's mum's actions show that part of her corporate role involves what might be called lying (all the while saying it still is a bad thing to do). Do you agree with Zoe and Eliza's mum, or do you agree with Eliza's mum's tactic? Or is it a bit of both?
- 'Cancel culture' can be career-destroying. Do you sympathise with Eliza in this situation? How might you be feeling in a situation like this? Would you be scared too?

- Do you think the way Eliza handles this moral dilemma at the end was the right way to approach it? What would you have done? As the story doesn't tell us what happens, what do you think the immediate aftermath might be, and the long-term implications for Eliza and the people in her life? If it's largely negative, how long do you think public perception would stay this way? What would have happened if Eliza had handled it the opposite way? Do you think she could have kept the lie going?
- Eliza ends up writing her final article for Craneswift about what really happened; the truth. Since we don't get to see Eliza's final piece, have a go at writing your own. Remember to pinpoint the main points in the story and try to embody Eliza's voice in your writing. Think about how Eliza felt during these moments, and see if you can incorporate it within your article. Do you think Eliza would have included a public apology?
- Have a look at the title. What about 'real' do you think the story might be referencing? And what does it physically end up being in the end? Is it more than one thing? Do you think there's an element of foreshadowing at play here? How so?
- Identify other novels/movies/stories you have come across that explore the fake-dating trope. (For instance, *To All the Boys I Loved Before* by Jenny Han or *Frankly in Love* by David Yoon.) What are the reasons for the characters to fake-date? What is the typical path that follows in these stories? Draw a flowchart describing the natural progression you identify.
- Once you have done this, compare this to how the trope plays out in *This Time It's Real*. Is it similar? Do the characters realise they have fallen for each other around a similar point in the narrative?
- Pinpoint moments in the novel that indicate Eliza beginning to fall for Caz. How does the author make this an authentic, believable progression? An example might be when we see Eliza's hesitations with Caz befriending her sister – Eliza likes how much they get along and doesn't want her sister upset when their publicity stunt is up.
- What other romance tropes can you name?
- If you read other genres, what other tropes or recurring plots have you spotted in those genres? For instance, fantasy novels might include tropes such as 'the chosen one' or a quest or an evil overlord; crime novels often include red herrings or a big reveal featuring all the suspects; horror stories might include a haunted house.
 - Why do you think those tropes have become popular, and why do you think readers often choose to read multiple books featuring the same trope? What is it about the familiarity of a trope that appeals to readers?
- Writers need to work hard to make sure a story feels fresh and original if the plot includes a trope. Name some of the plot points that the author, Ann Liang, has added to *This Time It's Real* that deepen and enrich the story beyond the 'fake-dating' concept.
- Art (eg. writing, reading, music) and being creative is known to be a therapeutic, enlightening experience. Can you identify artistic or creative activities within your own life that help you relax and get your creative juices flowing? What is it about your chosen medium that you like?
- How does writing and the act of writing help bring people together? What about it is so universal and enduring?
- On the flip side, reading fiction has been shown to help people develop empathy. What have you learnt from reading *This Time It's Real*? How did Eliza's or Caz's dilemmas make you feel? Did you relate to any of the situations or emotions they were experiencing? Discuss your answers with the person next to you!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Have you visited any of the places Eliza has lived in the story? Which place in the book would you most like to visit? Why?
- The power of friendship is a vital theme explored in this story. How did the story remind you what is special about the friendships and relationships you have formed in your own life? What do they mean to you?
- The author speaks about how *This Time It's Real* is semi-autobiographical, in that it is loosely based on her own experiences moving between cities and schools when she was a teenager. Do you think writing, to an extent, is autobiographical as we draw on our own experiences and our perceptions of the world? Is writing a product of our environment?
- Much like for Ann Liang, who wrote *This Time It's Real* during many waking moments of her life while also studying at

university, Eliza is also a writer at heart. What do you think writing means for Eliza? What does reading/writing mean for you?

- There are several moments in the novel that tug at your heartstrings. What emotional scene (or any other scene!) was your favourite and why?
- What are some quotes that stood out for you while you read the story? How did it affect you? Was it perhaps relatable or inspiring?
- Do you see yourself (even a past self) in any of the characters in the story? How so?
- Ann listened to Taylor Swift while writing this book. What music has been the soundtrack to different times in your life?